

# Scottish Widows building redevelopment gets the go-ahead

The iconic octagonal office building, used for this year's Hidden Doors festival, to be partly demolished for new housing, despite concerns over the plans.

The former Scottish Widows headquarters by Holyrood Park is to shrink in size by about a third, losing five of its distinctive hexagonal modules. The remaining seven will form a new 'business hub', café and crèche.

Five residential blocks will also be built on site including 57 affordable flats.

The go-ahead for new development plans was given by councillors this week despite a range of objections relating to the height of the new apartments, loss of trees, lack of affordable homes for families – and fears the part-demolition of the Sir Basil Spence-designed landmark would lead to its A-listed status being revoked.

The site has been empty for three years, although it is about to host this year's [Hidden Door](#) festival which opens up urban spaces for the public to explore. Running from 31st May until the 4th June the iconic building will play host to music, spoken word & poetry performers, visual artists, late night DJ sets and more. More info on this one-off event [can be found here](#).

The planning sub-committee were widely supportive of the development's application when it came before them on Wednesday (May 24). Members welcomed efforts made to retain some of the structure whilst delivering much-needed housing near to the city centre.

One local councillor who praised developers' "valiant effort" said redevelopment of the site "could well have been student housing".

Originally constructed in the 1970s, the current building is said to be home to the largest open plan office in Scotland with a total floor area of 26,800 square meters. But it has been completely empty since previous tenants, Lloyds Banking Group, vacated in 2020 and the redevelopment plans were lodged last year.

Planners said at the meeting that the "essential appearance of the office" will not change from the view of the main entrance on Dalkeith Road as the five modules being demolished are at the rear of the site.

However, they added the building's glass façade will be replaced as it contains "significant amounts of asbestos".

Meanwhile, three of the five apartment buildings will be six-sided to match the design of the existing structure with the remaining two L-shaped. Altogether they will contain 174 flats.

It was also highlighted that 47 out of 71 trees on the site would need to be cut down to make way for the residential blocks, but would be replaced with 81 new plantings.

Southside Community Council objected to the plans and said whilst supporting new housing in the area there would only be three three-bedroom affordable homes under the proposals, with the rest one and two bedrooms.

Community councillor Philip McDowell said many residents living in neighbouring streets were concerned about the height of the "oppressive" proposed flats, calling them "too big and too dark".

He welcomed the pledge to replace felled trees but pointed out they would not fully grow for around 50 years, and said he

hoped to see the ones that are eventually cut down “put to good use” such as sold to furniture makers.

Speaking on behalf of residents from East Parkside, a residential street to the north of the site, Dr James Gilmour said locals were “strongly opposed” to the housing but supported the demolition proposals. He added the tallest block will stand three storeys higher than the highest point of the office building

“The height will have an obvious adverse effect,” he told councillors. “The dark façades that are proposed for these new buildings will increase that adverse impact.

“Housing like that is completely out of character with the whole of the area.”

Conservation group Docomomo Scotland also urged the committee to reject the application. Co-ordinator Euan McCulloch said it was “not a good outcome for the building,” which he said was one of only 50 postwar buildings in Scotland to have been awarded A-listed status – warning could be lost if plans were taken forward.

“People have been bamboozled by arguments of sustainability,” he said in response to developers’ claim that work to make the building more sustainable could see the amount of Co2 it emits reduced from three million kilograms a year to zero.

Mr McCulloch added the city had a “choice between this scheme and an infinite number of other schemes”.

In a written submission, Historic Environment Scotland said: “The proposals are radical, and we consider they would be harmful to both the listed building and its setting. Such a harmful approach to a listed building and its setting would normally lead to an objection from ourselves.

“However, following our detailed assessment of the proposals for this challenging building, on balance, we consider it unlikely a less interventionist (harmful) scheme would either be viable, or able to proceed in practice.”

The committee were presented with mixed views from councillors representing Southside/Newington, as Steve Burgess, Greens, said it was “welcome that developers are trying to make use of

the A-listed building” but took issue with the height of the flats.

Labour’s Tim Pogson praised the “valiant effort” by developers to bring quality plans forward, commenting the site “could well have been” cleared for student housing.

Nick Ball from Corran Properties, one of the developers behind the project, said the plans would secure a “viable future for the building”.

He said: “It has taken nearly four years to get to this stage. From the outset, our goal was to create an exemplar project for the re-use of modernist heritage assets.

“We have considered every possible option for the building and the wider site. Every use, including student accommodation and hospitality to more unusual uses such as data centres and indoor farming – every configuration associated with those uses was considered, all the while considering potential impact on the listed building and its setting.

“The changes we propose will give this building flexibility to accommodate multiple tenants, creating a business hub that will benefit the southside and the city.”

The plans were supported by all but one member of the planning sub-committee, with the Lib Dems’ Alan Beal opposed on the basis of the height of the flats.

Convener Councillor Hal Osler, Lib Dems, said: “It is never more depressing in Edinburgh than the number of our buildings that are on at risk registers and it would have been horrific to see this continue to go down that line.

“It is also a very good example of what is going to be coming forward to us further in the future which is more urban-led development of changes of existing buildings.

“It’s not perfect, I think even the applicants would say themselves it’s not perfect but I do think they have taken a very long time to try very hard indeed to actually get something meaningful.”

*By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter*

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Design Plans. Image: Morgan Architects.